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## ANOTHER VIEW OF GETTYSBURG.

BY MAJOR-GENERAL JOHN GIBBON.

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IT IS said of General Taylor that he, on one occasion, after listening to several stories told of the battle of Buena Vista, remarked that he sometimes wondered whether he himself was present at that battle, so marked was the contrast between what he *heard* of it and what he had seen and heard at the battle.

I have been much interested in reading the several contributions in the March number of THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW on the battle of Gettysburg, and fear that Meade, could he read them, might be reminded of General Taylor's remark. He would certainly be reminded of the fact that fighting a battle is one thing, and fighting it afterwards on paper by the participants is a very different thing.

I once sat for several hours a day, for some days, in the studio of an artist whilst he was painting a picture of the battle of Gettysburg, chatting with him as he painted, and telling him what I knew of the battle, and referring him to others who could tell him more of the particular phase of the battle which he had chosen as the scene to be painted. In the course of these talks it came out that all the statements the artist had received did not agree, and in some of them the facts were so glaringly perverted, with the selfish object of exaggerating the services of particular individuals and commands, that I made the remark that the artist, in his endeavors to get at the truth, so as to present a faithful picture of the battle, must, from the varying statements made to him by the different participants, have formed a very poor idea in regard to the character of military men, their spirit of fairness, their little petty jealousies, and their ambitions. To my surprise he said "No"; on the contrary, he was generally impressed with their spirit of fairness and desire to give what they thought

to be facts. If this was the conclusion of an impartial investigator, who desired simply to get at the facts for the purpose of representing them on canvas, it is to be hoped that an impartial public will look at the subject in the same way when the narrators confine themselves to *facts* viewed as they received them.

When, however, they drop the statements of facts, and resort to speculation as to what might, could, would, or should have taken place, if all the facts now known had been as clearly known at the time, or if the conditions had been different from what they were, it is possible that an impartial public may not be as charitable as the artist.

The efforts to belittle General Meade's services in the battle of Gettysburg have been persistent, and are shown in a very marked manner in some of these papers. His best friends do not claim for General Meade any very remarkable manœuvres on the field of battle itself, but they do claim that he varied his plan of campaign to suit the circumstances of the case ; that three days after taking command of the army he concentrated his force at Gettysburg, placed it in position, and fought the battle to a successful issue under some considerable disadvantages.

There are those who will be disposed to question the assertion that "Hooker had no superior in manœuvring a large army"; and the campaign of Chancellorsville is generally regarded amongst military men as anything but a monument of "his strategical skill." How Gettysburg can be regarded as another monument of Hooker's strategical skill, it is difficult to understand. Even if he had, with the foresight of a prophet, designated Gettysburg as the scene of the coming conflict, he does not stand alone in that prediction ; and certainly he had nothing whatever to do with placing the army there : Meade had, and not only placed it there, but *kept* it there. Meade's manœuvre of his army before the battle cannot be belittled by the introduction of Hooker's name in a resolution of Congress, or in a narrative, any more than can his services during the battle be underrated by claiming all the meritorious parts of it for subordinates.

Whether "accident overruled the plans of Meade" and did drift him towards "a *better battlefield* than he had himself chosen," is a proposition which can never be established, since the battlefield once proposed by Meade was never fought on, and the battlefield of Gettysburg was. Once decided to give up his

proposed battle-ground and accept that of Gettysburg, at the recommendation of one in whose military judgment he placed great confidence, and who had been sent to the front to decide that very question, Meade lost no time in concentrating his army there. "And so swift was the concentration of his forces, *under the direction of the chief of staff*, that on the morning of the 2d of July his army was in position," etc. Under whose direction would he naturally make it but that of his chief of staff or his adjutant-general? Both are sometimes used; sometimes other officers; and sometimes the commanding general of an army does it verbally. As a commander at the time of one of the component parts of that army (the Second Corps), I can testify that the order to move to Gettysburg was received from General Meade's own lips before the receipt of Hancock's report from the front, and it was repeated in *the same way* at my camp after midnight as General Meade rode that night towards the field of Gettysburg.

The chief of staff, therefore, cannot claim all the merit for this "swift concentration." The same chief of staff acted for Hooker when he was building the "monument of his strategical skill" at Chancellorsville. It might be pertinent to ask, Was the chief of staff entitled to the credit of the "strategical skill" in that case? and did the chief of staff, or General Hooker, display "strategical skill" when, two columns of our troops having emerged from the Wilderness and pushing on towards Fredericksburg, without any enemy in sight, they were ordered back to that tangled Wilderness which proved so disastrous to our arms?

The question in regard to the movements of the Third Corps at Gettysburg is revived in these papers. Whatever can be said in favor of the forward movement of that corps on the 2d of July, the facts remain that it was placed in a position to which it was *not ordered* by General Meade; that it was attacked in that position by the enemy and, in spite of the reinforcements sent to it, forced back with heavy loss to the position General Meade originally designed it to occupy—one of the positions which General Newton refers to as those into which we were *hammered*, and out of which the enemy could not and did not whip us. That the corps and the troops with it did good fighting no one can ever justly deny. Whether it can be said of those operations that *victory* remained with us, depends a good deal upon what we mean by "victory." It is not usual to claim victory for the troops who

are driven from the ground, leaving their dead and wounded behind ; otherwise the First and the Eleventh Corps might claim a *victory* after their hard fight against superior forces on the 1st of July. If by "victory remaining with us" is meant that the Army of the Potomac maintained possession of its main line of battle, the statement is correct ; but of that fact the commander of the Third Corps was not aware at the time he was carried from the field ; and towards the maintenance of that main line General Meade himself contributed by leading forward in person reënforcements to the threatened line after the disaster to the Third Corps.

General Sickles says "that as soon as our troops on the left [the Third Corps and its supports] equalled those of the enemy the battle was decided in our favor." How decided in our favor ? By those troops being driven from the advanced position they occupied ? "If," he continues, "this equality had existed at the outset of the conflict, our victory would have been decisive early in the action, and the Sixth Corps," etc. ; "and if Buford's division of cavalry had remained on the left flank," etc. All of which *sounds* very much like saying *if* the writer had been in command, instead of General Meade, results would have been more satisfactory. This is another one of those questions which can *never* be decided, and even the future historian will probably ignore it and describe the features of the battle with Meade in command, and state the circumstances as they *actually existed* ; mindful of the fact that Gettysburg is not the only great battle in the history of the world, nor even in the history of our own country, with regard to which attempts have been made to underrate the services of the commander and overrate those of some subordinate.\*

I do not understand what General Sickles means by saying "at the close of the battle of the 2d, after the enemy retired, the disposition of our forces remained as already described," for certainly no description in his article preceding that remark can apply to any portion of *his command*. He says : "We pass over the council of war on the night of the 2d without comment, since it had *no result*." This is a somewhat remarkable statement, since General Meade's enemies have openly and persistently asserted that he wanted to retreat ; in fact, had given orders to retreat, and would have retreated but for the "result" of that council. The

\* One of our greatest commanders once characterized this sort of thing as "the pruriency of fame not earned."

statement made by General Sickles, who was not present at the council, is not at all in accord with that of General Newton, who was. General Newton says: "The council unanimously voted to fight it out on the position we held." Surely this cannot be called "no result."

General Newton, in commenting on the council, says: "All agreed, so far as I remember, that the position in itself was a good one, but I suggested the possibility of an attempt to turn our left," etc. This recollection agrees substantially with my own, and General Newton was the only one in the council whom I heard make any objection to the position. That he did make some objection is made all the more distinct in my memory from the fact that he was the only *engineer* officer in the council (Warren being asleep on the floor). His objection, therefore, came with especial force, and for a little while conversation on that point between General Newton and myself occupied the attention of the members. The objection to the position that it could be turned on the left was made by General Hancock in his first report sent from the front to General Meade on the 1st of July, and was, I presume, the cause of Hancock sending me orders to halt the Second Corps short of the battlefield that night, from which place General Meade soon after midnight ordered me forward, as before stated. There could, at that time, have been no doubt in General Meade's mind about Gettysburg being a place in which to fight a battle.

So much stress has been laid upon the unanimity with which those present at this October meeting agreed in attributing to General Meade a certain form of expression that it will not be out of place to put side by side the names of the corp commanders who were present at the council of war on July 2d and the names of those present twenty-seven years after, who determined, with so much unanimity, that General Meade was held to the battlefield only by the votes of his subordinates.

Those who voted on the several  
questions submitted to council.

1. SEDGWICK.
2. SLOCUM.
3. HOWARD.
4. HANCOCK.
5. SYKES.
6. NEWTON.
7. BIRNEY.
8. WILLIAMS.
9. GIBBON.

Those present at the Gettysburg meet-  
ing in 1890.

1. SLOCUM.
2. HOWARD.
3. NEWTON.

Even were the three present "in entire accord" regarding General Meade's assertion, two of the number must have changed their opinions on the subject since they first expressed themselves.\*

But in any event it will be the province of the future historian to weigh in the balance the testimony of three members given twenty-seven years after the battle with that of seven out of the nine officers comprising the council of war placed on record soon after the battle. From the balance must necessarily be excluded the testimony of two present at the meeting in October, 1890, since they were not present at General Meade's council. The other officer (General Butterfield) present at the council and at the meeting twenty-seven years afterwards, it has been publicly asserted, was the one who, as General Meade's chief of staff, wrote out the order for the army to retreat from Gettysburg, and it was stated in the newspapers soon after the battle that a corps commander had this order in his pocket when he ordered an advance of his corps. It was intimated also that he ordered the corps forward for the very purpose of bringing on a fight, and *preventing a retreat*. This allusion was, of course, to General Sickles and the Third Corps. What truth there was in the newspaper reports I have no means of knowing. It is, however, a remarkable fact that no copy of that order has ever been produced, not even the copy alluded to in the newspaper reports, and that General Meade always declared that he never directed any such order to be made out; and all the world knows that no such order was executed, nor any attempt made to execute it.

Our army commanders during the Civil War are, of course, now that the war is over, proper subjects for fair criticism, though theories and speculations regarding what might have happened, had the circumstances been different, are, as a general thing, idle. Of course, had Hooker remained in command, the Army of the Potomac might have defeated Lee quite as well as, possibly better than, it did under Meade; but the feeling in the army was generally one of apprehension that a commander who had, not two months before, been badly outgeneraled with nearly three times

\* General Newton, in a letter dated March 10, 1864, says: "I was frequently with the commanding general on that day [2d], and was likewise present at the council, and nothing that I heard him say has ever given me the impression that he insisted on the withdrawal of the army from before Gettysburg." General Howard, in a letter dated June 9, 1883, says: "I did not hear your father [General Meade] utter a word which made me think that he then favored a withdrawal of his troops."

the force that Lee had at his disposal, might, in the open country of Pennsylvania, be outgeneralled again.

In this the army *might* have been proved mistaken, but a lack of confidence in the ability of its leader is a very heavy handicapping on the eve of a great battle, and in this respect Meade, although comparatively unknown, had a great advantage—an advantage increased very considerably by the results of the battle of Gettysburg.

It is not unusual in war to criticise army commanders for not taking full advantage of their successes in great battles, and in the Civil War it was a very common mode of criticism on both sides. At the very start General Joseph E. Johnston was blamed in some quarters for not pursuing our army of fugitives from the field of Bull Run, and taking possession of the capital, with an army of green volunteers, never in battle before, and scarcely able to move itself, to say nothing of its supplies.

The following year there were not lacking critics who commented on the fact that Lee failed to adopt Stonewall Jackson's suggestion to attack Burnside's army at Fredericksburg, after its repulse, and drive it into the river. Loud complaints were made against McClellan for not driving Lee's army into the Potomac after the battle of Antietam ; and so on.

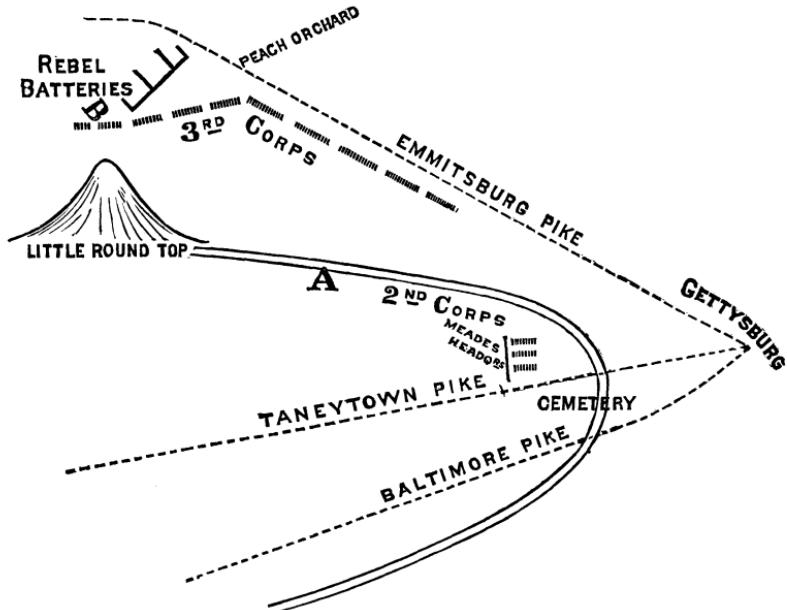
So that it appears to be expecting too much of human nature that the critics should abstain from complaints that Meade failed to follow up his victory by capturing Lee's army, either by hurling against it, after the repulse of Pickett's charge, the whole of the Twelfth Corps from the extreme right of our line, supported in "the pursuit" by a division of the Sixth Corps, or afterwards by attacking Lee's army in its intrenched position at Falling Waters, even against the earnest advice of most of his prominent generals.

I am decidedly of the opinion that, if Meade had had at his disposal a division of cavalry to hurl against Lee's centre on the repulse of Pickett's charge, or, more properly speaking, the void left in that centre when the charge was repulsed, Lee's army might have been irretrievably cut in two ; but Meade's cavalry divisions had their hands full on the rear and flanks of our army in protecting those from "the force sent to our rear," or rather *proposed* to be sent to our rear, for it never got there, not so much because Sickles's position on the second day had prevented

Longstreet's junction with the force as from the fact that the gallant fight of our cavalry prevented it, and it took Longstreet so long a time to force the Third Corps and its supports back into the position originally intended for it that the question of his making a junction with the force originally intended to go to our rear was no longer one for consideration then, and hence, as General Butterfield says, it is needless to speculate about it *now*.

The attempt to show that the main battle of Gettysburg took place on the 2d of July, and that the affair of the 3d was a mere episode, will, I think, prove a failure, for the simple reason that the facts do not justify that idea.

The rough sketch herewith will serve to give the general reader a fair idea of the situation.



There can be no question, I think, that General Meade intended originally the Third Corps to occupy the position marked A, in the line of battle (defined in my sketch by double lines). General Sickles, I believe, declares he never received any orders to that effect. Neither did he *receive any orders to go where he did go*.

In cases of this kind there is and can be but *one* rule in armies. If a soldier is ordered to go to a certain point on a field

of battle, he goes there, *if he can*. If he does not get orders to go there, he does not go, with the one single exception that overwhelming necessity requires him to make the move, and this when he is so situated that he cannot solicit or receive the orders of his commanding officer. One of the principal reasons for selecting corps commanders is to obtain generals possessed of the qualifications and judgment requisite for the exercise of such discretion. General Sickles himself exemplifies the rule in disregarding an order he had from the commanding general in his pocket, and marching from Emmitsburg to Gettysburg. He marched "towards the enemy," and the results justified his judgment.

In the other case, in moving forward on the battlefield to the Emmitsburg pike, *he had no orders*, was almost under the very eye of the commanding general, and the very fact of his not receiving orders ought to have been, with him, a reason for still further delay in a forward movement on which the fate of the Army of the Potomac did not turn (nor that of his position). It is true the position at A had some disadvantages. Some portions of it were lower than some portions of the Emmitsburg pike, but the position along that pike, all the way up to the Peach Orchard, was well commanded by the batteries of the Second Corps, which, however, could not be used without hurting the men of Humphreys's division, Third Corps, as it fell back in great confusion completely enfiladed by the enemy's batteries at B. The case here was an entirely different one from the first case cited. In that General Sickles had a *preparatory* order from his distant commander to make a certain move on a certain contingency (the enemy assuming the offensive), but even that move was to take place only after the enemy was held in check long enough to get the trains, etc., out of the way. Earnest appeals for help came from Gettysburg, where the two corps (First and Eleventh) were fighting hard to "hold the enemy in check"; and General Sickles decided, and decided properly, to go to their assistance, and marched "to the sound of the guns."

In the other case General Sickles claims to have received no orders, although almost in sight of the army commander, and on his own responsibility he placed his corps in a faulty position, in which, to avoid his left flank being "in the air," he was obliged to form a "broken line," and bend his left back towards Little

Round Top, thus increasing the weakness of his line and compelling him to call for help almost immediately after the enemy commenced the attack upon him. This enforced action of the Third Corps involved a heavy struggle, which included, besides that corps, one division of the Second and most of the Fifth, seriously endangered a rupture of our main line, and resulted in the advanced line being *hammered* into the position which we held to the last, and which General Meade intended originally should be held from the first.

JOHN GIBBON.